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THE INFLUENCE OF INTERGROUP CONTACT AND ETHNOCULTURAL EMPATHY ON EMPLOYEES' ATTITUDES TOWARD DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Intergroup relations at work become more complex with the cultural diversification of societies. A diverse workforce can be at the same time a competitive advantage and a source of internal organizational conflicts. Therefore, it is important to know the conditions that link intergroup contact to the emergence of an inclusive organizational culture. This case study proposes a model of intergroup contact that focuses on individual factors amenable to change. Therefore, we propose that ethnocultural empathy is the mediator that explains how contact leads to increased positive diversity-related attitudes and reduced negative diversity-related attitudes. Our case study focuses on the middle and higher management (147 respondents) of a Dutch organization which faces a problem with the promotion of ethnic minority employees. The data shows that ethnocultural empathy is a mediator in the relation between intergroup contact and positive attitudes towards diversity, but not negative ones. Hence, our findings suggest that while empathy can trigger more positive attitudes, it cannot prevent stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

KEYWORDS: *intergroup relations at work, ethnocultural empathy, attitudes towards diversity, intergroup contact.*

Cultural diversity is an ever more debated topic in the increasingly diverse Dutch society. Currently, 10% of the total 16.6 million people living in the Netherlands are ethnic minorities, and this percent is expect to grow to 14% by 2015 (Glastra, Meerman, Schedler, & De Vries, 2000). However, the situation of ethnic minorities

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is not to be envied. From 1985 onwards, the unemployment rate of ethnic minorities is three to four times higher than among the ethnic Dutch labor population (Glastra et al., 2000). Furthermore, fitting the general trend in Europe, the debate about the integration of ethnic minority groups within the Dutch culture is ever more ardent. Research has pointed to an escalation of negative attitudes of the ethnic Dutch majority toward ethnic minorities justified by the belief that ethnic minorities do not put enough effort into adapting to the Dutch culture (Schaafsma, 2008). This makes ethnic minorities feel they are not accepted in the Netherlands (SCP, 2003; Van Oudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret, 2006). Moreover, the social distance between ethnic majority and minority group members is larger than ever (SCP, 2003). For example, only one out of three Dutch ethnic majority members has contact with ethnic minority members in their private life. The second generation of ethnic minority group members seems to have much more contact with other ethnic minority group members compared to contact with ethnic majority group members (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2005). Consequently, there is an increasing risk of a society divided along ethnic lines (Gowricharn, 1999).

Because of the demographic changes in the workforce, it has become increasingly important to have a more accurate image about attitudes and perceptions towards ethnic minorities at work (Cundiff & Komarraju, 1999). Diversity in organizations can be a capital competitive advantage, if properly managed (Cundiff, Nadler, & Swan, 2009). However, promoting and supporting cultural diversity in organizations can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it increases intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) and opens up the possibility of establishing common ground and more personal and positive relations (Schaafsma, 2008). On the other hand, supporting diversity and multiculturalism can be perceived as identity threatening for the dominant ethnic majority members (Verkuyten, 2005; Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2010). Hence, if the organizational goal of promoting a culture of diversity is at odds with the values, behaviors, attitudes and feelings of its majority employees, it becomes hard to meet (Turnbull, Greenwood, Tworoger & Golden, 2009). Therefore, research on employees' perceptions of diversity and on the factors facilitating the emergence of a supportive and inclusive culture is largely needed. Our research sets out to meet this need by exploring a functional model of attitudes towards diversity. The model that we set out to explore focuses on individual aspects that are modifiable. With this, we aim to offer theoretical insight on mechanisms that can be translated into organizational interventions which can support organizations in their effort to create a more inclusive culture.

The first step to understand the conditions for the development of a diversity-oriented culture is to understand how intergroup contact operates and with what consequences. On the one hand, there are researchers who believe that employees in ethnically diverse settings have a difficult time establishing positive

relationships with each other. For instance, the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) states that similarity between people (in attitudes, values, or demographic characteristics) increases interpersonal attraction and liking (Byrne, 1971; Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986). As a consequence, dissimilarity (like dissimilarity in ethnicity) would lower the attraction and may cause feelings of threat and anxiety. Employees could feel like their values and norms are threatened by the very different norms and values of the out-group. This may lead employees to avoid interethnic contact (Plant & Devine, 2003), or respond negatively to interethnic contact (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002).

Social identity theory posits that people use dissimilarities and similarities as a foundation to categorize themselves and others. Group membership is subsequently internalized as a social identity and encompassed in the self-concept. The sense of group belonging is a source of global personal self-esteem and psychological well-being. In order to maintain a positive self-esteem, in-group members are evaluated more positively than out-group members, and the latter are discriminated against. The presence of an out-group is thus sufficient to provoke competition and discriminatory behavior and attitudes on the part of the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Interestingly, in research on Dutch population, Verkuyten (2005) found that ethnic identity is more salient and important to minority members, compared to majority ones. This salience might lead ethnic minority members to involuntarily create an ethnic frame that will trigger the in-group vs. out-group distinction and subsequent discrimination.

A different perspective on interethnic relations at work (the contact hypothesis – Allport, 1954) proposes that contact in the workplace would give members from different ethnic groups the possibility to interact and establish positive relationship with each other. This hypothesis states that contact between in- and out-group members may lead to more positive intergroup attitudes. This is only expected in situations where there are supportive egalitarian norms, common goals, equal status, and cooperation and when people have the opportunity to get to know each other voluntarily (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The workplace provides a situation in which these conditions are met (Schaafsma, 2008). Hence, employees may become aware of what they have in common, they could create a common in-group identity (Gaernter, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996), which would result in more positive feelings towards each other. Extensive research has already been conducted regarding the optimal conditions of interethnic contact, although most of these studies have been done in laboratory settings with artificial groups (Dovidio & Esses, 2001). Consequently, there is nowadays a long list of conditions that would lead to successful intergroup contact, which brings about the critique that contact hypothesis looks now more like a grocery shopping list (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). However, Pettigrew and Tropp (2000) have found that it is not necessary that all these conditions are present simultaneously, in order to reduce bias. Mere contact

can be a sufficient condition for bias reduction that is lasting and generalizes beyond individuals to their larger group (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). Additionally, each of Allport's conditions can further enhance positive contact and bias reduction. The more conditions that are present, the more likely a positive intergroup attitude will be achieved.

While the first two theories we presented explain why the ethnic divide appears in the workplace and what are its consequences, the intergroup hypothesis provides the frame to explore facilitating factors in intergroup relations. Since the focus of this research is on the conditions that facilitate more positive attitudes towards diversity, we shall explore predictions generated by the intergroup contact hypothesis. Based on previous findings, we propose that:

H1: The quality of intergroup contact has a stronger positive impact on ethnocultural empathy than the quantity of intergroup contact.

Ethnocultural empathy is a stable but trainable trait defined as 'empathy directed towards people from racial and ethnic cultural groups different from one's own group' (Wang, Davidson, Yakushko, Bilestein Savoy, Tan, & Bleier, 2003). Ethnocultural empathy is thus not only about being able to empathize with ethnic minority groups, but about empathizing with any ethnic group, regardless of the notation of minorities or majorities. According to Ridley and Lingle (1996) it 'involves a deepening of the human empathic response to permit a sense of mutuality and understanding across the great differences in values and expectations that cross-cultural interchange often involves' (Ridley & Lingle, 1996:22). Ethnocultural empathy penetrates through the ideational and affective exclusionary wall of ethnocentrism and racism (Parson, 1993) and therefore can change attitudes towards diversity.

According to Wang et al. (2003), ethnocultural empathy comprises four dimensions, namely: 'empathic feeling and expression' (the verbal expression of ethnocultural empathic thoughts and feelings toward members of other ethnic groups), 'empathic perspective taking' (the effort individuals are willing to take and the ability they have to understand the experiences, thoughts and emotions of people with a different ethnic background), 'acceptance of cultural differences' (the understanding, acceptance, and valuing of cultural traditions and customs of individuals from differing racial and ethnic groups), and 'empathic awareness' (the awareness or knowledge that one has about the experience of ethnic groups different than one's own).

Studies have shown that ethnocultural empathy can counteract hostile attitudes and behavior, and thus improve intergroup relations (Litvack-Miller, MacDougall, & Romney, 1997; Wang et al., 2003). Others (Davis, 1996) demonstrated that a lack of empathy can cause negative attitudes and aggressive

behavior. A lack of empathy is also proven to lead to hostility toward other ethnic groups and individuals (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Overall, ethnocultural empathy would encourage positive attitudes and actions to remove injustice, instead of maintaining the status-quo (Batson et al., 1997). When intergroup interaction is a challenge and a necessity on the work floor, being ethnoculturally empathetic is highly important (Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008). Ethnocultural empathy counteracts possible tensions and conflict due to intergroup contact and therefore mediates its impact on diversity-related attitudes. It is positively related to helping behavior, and it seems to predict whether someone will be able to work successfully with individuals from other cultures (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000). Ethnic empathy is thus expected to have a likely relationship between intergroup contact and attitudes towards diversity (Cundiff et al., 2009).

Different theories try to explain the mechanisms behind the role of ethnocultural empathy in improving intergroup relations (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). First, empathy could reduce perceptions of dissimilarity and feelings of threat. Prejudices people hold towards an out-group are often exaggerated perceptions of dissimilarity, fear and threat. When people come in contact and empathize with each other, they might see that they are less different and have more in common with members from the out-group than they first thought. They could even see each other as members of a shared common humanity or common destiny (Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990). When employees are able to learn from the out-group and learn how to view the world through their eyes, the feelings of threat engendered by concerns over differences (in values, beliefs, and norms, misperceptions of realistic conflict, and anxiety over interacting with members of an out-group) can be dissolved. When people understand how others view the world, this can make “others” seem less alien and frightening, and thus has the potential to break down the perceived barriers between in- and out-group (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Different theories of the mediating role of empathy suggest that the manner in which empathy performs its meditational role will influence the outcomes of the empathic responses (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). For instance, in one of the first investigations of the cognitive dissonance mechanism, Rokeach (1971) demonstrated that when White students were confronted with the discrepancy between their attitudes and behavior toward minorities and their beliefs in freedom, the response was that the students changed both their attitudes and behavior regarding ethnic minority members.

Therefore, we propose the following mediation hypotheses:

H2a: Intergroup contact increases positive attitudes towards diversity through ethnocultural empathy.

H2b: Intergroup contact decreases negative attitudes towards diversity through ethnocultural empathy.

The final aspect that makes our proposed model highly useful for guiding interventions in organizations is the conceptualization of attitudes towards diversity. Attitudes towards diversity are defined as a broad range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses (De Meuse & Hostager, 2001). According to the ABC model of attitudes (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960), an attitude has three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive component focuses on beliefs about diversity in principle (such as ‘diversity means more potential for creativity’). The affective component focuses on the ‘gut’ feelings towards diversity (such as excitement for interacting with different cultures or fear of what is not known). Finally, the behavioral component refers to behavioral intentions in diverse environments (such as cooperation or conflict). Research on the ABC model of attitudes proved long ago the primacy of cognitions over emotions and behavioral intentions (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). The most lasting path to change either the affective or the behavioral dimension of attitudes is by first changing the underlying cognitions. In line with this perspective, we hypothesize that:

H3: The cognitive dimension of attitudes towards diversity mediates the impact of ethnocultural empathy on the affective and behavioral dimensions of attitudes towards diversity.

To offer a clearer overview of the proposed relationships, Figure 1 summarizes hypotheses 1-3.

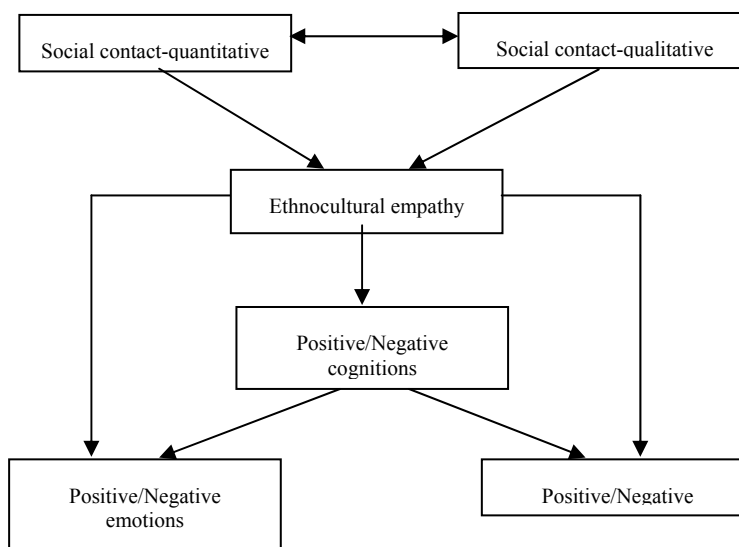


Figure 1

An integrated model of ethnocultural empathy mediating the relation between social contact and diversity-related attitudes

Context of the research

We conducted our research in a cleaning organization that operates throughout the Netherlands. The results reported in this study are part of a larger investigation requested by the organization in question. The organization wanted to find out why ethnic minority employees, who constitute the large majority of the work-floor force, are not represented in the managerial level. The investigation targeted three aspects: the position of the ethnic minority employees towards promotion perspectives (why they make so few applications for promotion to even middle managerial levels), the position of ethnic majority employees towards ethnic minority colleagues (investigating possible prejudiced attitudes towards them, as well as factors that might increase positive attitudes), and the general culture and policy of the organization.

This research reports the findings of a possible mechanism that would lead to more positive attitudes towards ethnic minority co-workers.

Sample

Our respondents were the entire pool of middle and higher managers of the organization in question. The sample encompasses 147 respondents in total, with a mean age of 42.7 years (SD 9.727), ranging from 23 to 64. 54 participants (36.7%)

were male, and 93 (63.3%) female. 135 of them are, according to the official CBS definition, 'autochthonous' (i.e., they are born in the Netherlands or a Western country, and also their parents are born in the Netherlands or a Western country). Only 12 respondents are allochthonous (i.e., born in a Non-Western country, or one of their parents is born in a Non-Western country - CBS, 2010).

Procedure

The data was gathered through a survey for the middle and higher management of the organization, administered with the help of the organization's HR department. The HR managers distributed the questionnaires in hard copy in their own district. Respondents could leave their filled-in questionnaire, in a closed envelop, in a box in the HRM office. Participation by middle and higher management of the organization was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was conducted over a period of three weeks. Due to the adopted procedure, response rate was over 90%.

Instruments

The Direct Social Contact Scale was used to measure the quantity and quality of contact with ethnic minority members. This scale is derived and translated from Curşeu, Stoop, and Schalk (2007) and contains six items, three for quantity and three for quality. In the items used to evaluate the quantity of direct social contact the respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale how often they had contact with ethnic minorities during work, in their private life, and on the streets. Then three associated items were used to evaluate the quality of this contact. An item evaluating the quality of social contact was associated with every item used to evaluate the quantity of contact. The respondents were asked to describe the general character of their contact with ethnic minorities in every situation using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1- 'very negative' to 5- 'very positive'. Higher scores reflect higher and more positive direct social contact with ethnic minority members (Curşeu et al., 2007). The Cronbach alpha coefficient was .74. for the entire scale, .63 for the quality subscale and .65 for the quantity subscale.

The Ethnocultural Empathy Scale (EES) was used to measure the degree of employees' ethnocultural empathy for different ethnic groups. It contains 31 items (12 reverse-scored) and is derived and translated into Dutch from Wang et al. (2003). Items were measured on a scale from 1 (strongly agree that it the statement pertains to me) to 5 (strongly disagree that the statement pertains to me). Higher scores reflect *having less empathy* for other ethnicities and cultures. Therefore, we recoded the general scale before running the analyses. The SEE consists of four subscales. The subscales are Empathic feeling and Expression (EFAE, 15 items, Cronbach's alpha = .76), Empathic Perspective Taking (EPT, 7 items, Cronbach's alpha = .56), Acceptance of Cultural Differences (AC, 5 items,

Cronbach's alpha = .62) and Empathic Awareness (EA, 4 items, Cronbach's alpha = .639). Cronbach's Alpha for the overall scale is .80.

The Reaction-to-Diversity-Inventory is used to measure the reactions to diversity of employees. This scale is derived and translated into Dutch from De Meuse and Hostager (2001) and contains a list of seventy words which all depict a positive or negative response to one of the five dimensions. The respondents had to circle the words which they associate with cultural diversity, and could circle as many as they wanted to. All positive words have a value of +1; all negative words have a value of -1. Individual summary scores are measure both for the positive and negative dimensions, and could range from 0 to 35. The individual scores for the subscales could range from 0 to 7. When respondents chose not to answer one of the subscales, this was represented by a 0 in the database. After this, all zeros were indicated as missing values. The scale of Reactions towards Diversity had a Cronbach's Alpha of .78.

RESULTS

Before addressing the main results, the descriptive statistics for the variables in the model and the matrix of intercorrelations are presented in Table 1. These results verify that the conditions for structural equation modelling are met.

Table 1
Matrix of correlations of the variables employed in the models

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Social contact - quantity	3.22	.84	1	.56**	.13	.21	.06	-.08	-.02	-.06	.16
2. Social contact - quality	3.65	.60		1	.17	-.08	.10	-.21*	.03	-.26	.05
3. Ethnocultural empathy	3.38	.51			1	.19	.22	.12	.25*	.07	.14
4. Negative cognitions	1.40	.92				1	-.09	.04	.10	.31	-.04
5. Positive cognitions	2.12	1.28					1	.16	.36*	.28	.58**
6. Negative emotions	1.88	1.19						1	.26*	.31*	.15
7. Positive emotions	2.01	1.06							1	-.06	.24*
8. Negative behaviours	1.70	.94								1	-.00
9. Positive behaviours	2.60	1.46									1

As predicted in H1, quality of social contact had a stronger impact ($\beta=.17$, $p=.14$) on ethnocultural empathy than the quantity of social contact ($\beta=.03$, $p=.76$). However, none of these relations was significant. From our results, it appears that social contact (irrespective of its quantity and quality) does not significantly increase ethnocultural empathy.

Our next step is to describe and compare the fit indices of the two proposed models (according to *H2a* and *H2b*). As one can notice in Table 2, the fit indices for the positive attitudes model are superior to the ones for the negative attitudes model. Furthermore, only the positive model fits the data, according to these indices. In other words, ethnocultural empathy is positively related to positive attitudes towards diversity (judgments, emotions and behaviors alike) and mediates the impact of intergroup contact on positive attitudes towards diversity (*H2a*). However, more ethnocultural empathy does not mean as well a significant decrease in the negative attitudes (judgments, emotions and behaviors). The mediating role of ethnocultural empathy in the relation between intergroup contact and attitudes towards diversity is not supported (*H2b*).

Table 2
Fit indices for the tested path models

Model	Chi ²	df	Sig.	CMIN/df	RMSEA	NFI	CFI
Positive attitudes	4.28	7	.74	.61	.00	.95	1.00
Negative attitudes	18.13	7	.01	2.59	.10	.76	.79

These general statements about the models are further supported by the in-depth analysis of the path indices. Neither the structural coefficients (see Table 3), nor the further analyses of indirect paths (see Table 4) support the mediation role of ethnocultural empathy in the relation between intergroup contact and negative attitudes towards diversity. However, a significant and interesting mediation model holds for positive attitudes towards diversity.

Table 3
 Unstandardized and standardized structural coefficients of the
 (1) positive and (2) negative attitudes model

Regressions			B	S.E.	Sig.	Beta
1. Ethnocultural empathy	←	Social contact-quantity	.02	.06	.76	.03
Ethnocultural empathy	←	Social contact-quality	.13	.09	.14	.17
Positive cognitions	←	Ethnocultural empathy	.52	.27	.05	.22
Positive behaviours	←	Ethnocultural empathy	.07	.25	.77	.03
Positive emotions	←	Positive cognitions	.25	.11	.02	.29
Positive behaviours	←	Positive cognitions	.66	.11	.00	.55
Positive emotions	←	Ethnocultural empathy	.38	.23	.09	.19
2. Ethnocultural empathy	←	Social contact-quantity	.02	.06	.76	.03
Ethnocultural empathy	←	Social contact-quality	.13	.09	.14	.17
Negative cognitions	←	Ethnocultural empathy	.27	.28	.34	.15
Negative behaviours	←	Ethnocultural empathy	.05	.24	.84	.03
Negative emotions	←	Negative cognitions	.11	.26	.63	.08
Negative behaviours	←	Negative cognitions	.30	.19	.11	.29
Negative emotions	←	Ethnocultural empathy	.27	.24	.26	.11

Table 4
*Standardized indirect effects for the
 (1) positive and (2) negative attitudes model*

	Social contact- quality	Social contact- quantity	Ethnocultural empathy	Negative cognitions
1. Ethnocultural empathy	.00	.00	.00	.00
Positive cognitions	.04	.01	.00	.00
Positive behaviours	.02	.01	.12	.00
Positive emotions	.04	.01	.06	.00
2. Ethnocultural empathy	.00	.00	.00	.00
Negative cognitions	.03	.01	.00	.00
Negative behaviours	.01	.00	.04	.00
Negative emotions	.02	.00	.01	.00

Based on previous research on the three-dimension model of attitudes, our third hypothesis proposed that the cognitive dimension of attitudes towards diversity mediates the impact of ethnocultural empathy on the affective and behavioral dimensions of attitudes towards diversity. The data supported this hypothesis for positive attitudes alone. A full mediation is present for the empathy-cognition-behavior relation, as indicated by the direct and indirect path indices (see Tables 3 and 4). The mediation is only partial for the emotional dimension. However, this partial mediation is given by the very strong direct impact of empathy on emotion (see Figure 2). It appears that positive emotions towards diversity are elicited both directly by higher ethnocultural empathy, as well as indirectly, by increasing positive cognitions towards diversity.

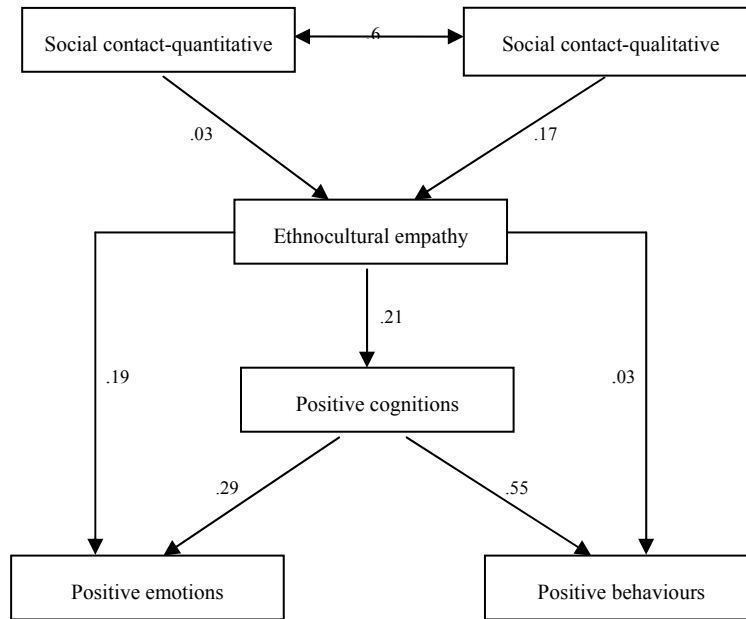


Figure 2

An integrated model of ethnocultural empathy mediating the relation between social contact and positive diversity-related attitudes

For negative attitudes however, not only does judgment fail to mediate between ethnocultural empathy and diversity-related negative emotions and behaviors, but the direct effect is missing as well. A possible explanation lies in the socially desirable answers when it comes to negative attitudes towards diversity and the distortions they might induce. However, different operating mechanisms for positive and negative attitudes should not be excluded at this point and are worth exploring in future research.

DISCUSSION

We set out in this research to explore the impact of ethnocultural empathy on the relation between intergroup contact and attitudes towards diversity. The choice of our main variable was given by its double nature. According Wang et al. (2003), ethnocultural empathy is both a learned ability (hence, it can be educated in organizational interventions) and a personal trait. Theory proposes that this trait can be learned as a result of the companionship of members from different ethnic minority groups. In other words, we expected intergroup contact to improve

employees' ability to feel empathy for individuals from another ethnic group. However, our results are not conclusive in this respect. The quality of social contact does positively impact ethnocultural empathy, however this relation is not significant. What we did find out, it is that, as Allport did note for so long, contact alone is not sufficient to overcome stereotypes. The quantity of contact has close to 0 impact on empathy. It is the quality of this contact that can make a difference.

Of the four dimensions of empathy, perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences were most influenced by intergroup contact. In other words, it seems that employees who have more contact with individuals from a different ethnic group to their own, are more able to take the perspective of a colleague with a different ethnic background, to perceive the world as the other person does (Wang et al., 2003). Furthermore, intergroup contact also increases the acceptance of cultural differences on the work floor. Thus, when having more contact with someone from another ethnic group, one is more open towards cultural differences and towards individuals with an ethnic background different to one's own.

Given the different impact of social contact on the various dimensions of ethnocultural empathy, future research should re-approach the empathy from a block vision (all four dimensions put on the same level) to a mediation perspective. It is possible that some dimensions are precursors for others and that not all of them behave in the same way towards antecedents and consequences. As we shall see in the following paragraphs, the relation of ethnocultural empathy with subsequent attitudes towards diversity gives further support to this assumption.

Becoming more familiar with and having greater understanding of ethnic minorities working in organizations was reported to be associated with less automatic bias toward ethnic minorities in the organization (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2003). Therefore, increasing empathy and the understanding of how others feel should reduce bias directed at ethnically diverse groups. Based on extant studies, we expected ethnocultural empathy to positively impact on positive attitudes towards diversity, and negatively on negative attitudes towards diversity. Our data only partially met these expectations. When employees "know another person's inner experience and feel (perceive) the feelings (emotions) of other people" (Duan & Hill, 1996), they seem indeed to exhibit more positive attitudes towards diversity, at cognitive, emotional and behavioral levels. Our results with respect to negative attitudes can be linked with the findings of Davis (1996). In his research, he demonstrated that a lack of empathy can cause negative attitudes and aggressive behavior. So it might be that lack of empathy positively impacts negative attitudes, whereas empathy impacts positive ones. These findings might lead to a new way of looking at the operating mechanisms of empathy. However, controlled and longitudinal research is needed before any such affirmations can be defended.

Looking more in-depth to how empathy operates, we decanted the two dimensions of ethnocultural empathy that most influence positive attitudes towards

diversity: ‘feeling and expression’, and ‘acceptance of diversity’. When people are able to verbally express empathic thoughts and feelings towards members of other ethnic groups, this will elicit more positive emotional responses, more positive judgments and more positive behavioral intentions towards ethnically different colleagues. Possibly through a mechanism of cognitive dissonance, once the empathy has been expressed out loud, employees develop more positive judgments and cognitions about diversity, picturing it as a source of good things. Subsequently, these thoughts then lead to positive behavioral intentions, like collaboration, understanding, supporting and really listening to others. Expression of empathy also induces positive feelings towards ethnically diverse co-workers.

Furthermore, when employees are able to accept why people from other ethnic groups behave as they do (i.e., acceptance of cultural diversity), they will start thinking better of these colleagues. Common sense says ‘you couldn’t love something you didn’t understand’ (Carter, 1976). Getting in contact and then accepting people with a different background, with their entire cultural ‘package’ is the first step towards positively relating to them. This will again be reflected in an improvement in behavioral intentions and elicited emotions.

So how does ethnocultural empathy improve positive feelings, attitudes and behavior regarding diversity? Prejudice and resistance regarding ethnic groups are often associated with exaggerated perceptions of intergroup differences and high levels of fear and threat. Through ethnocultural empathy, people realize that members from another ethnic group are not as different as they thought. Ethnocultural empathy can thus reduce perceptions of dissimilarity (change of cognitions) and feelings of threat (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Consequently, employees start thinking more positively about diversity, experience more positive feelings and have more positive behavioral intentions.

Our data support the idea of a double mechanism through which more positive feelings towards ethnically diverse others are elicited: a direct one, from empathy to feelings, and an indirect one, through the mediation of diversity beliefs.

For the direct path, a plausible mechanism resides in the reduction of threat and fear. Fear is a primary emotion that is generated at the same time, and not necessarily subsequently, to the corresponding cognitive processing. When employees learn about the out-group and learn to view the world through their perspective, feelings of threat by differences in values, beliefs and norms may be reduced or even dissolved. Being able to understand how others view the world, makes “the others” less alien and frightening (Triandis, 2006). This process will thus break down the perceived barriers between groups (Stephan & Finlay, 1999).

Second, ethnocultural empathy creates cognitive dissonance. Empathizing with members of an out-group towards which one exhibited negative attitudes previously, may create dissonance due to the discrepancy between the individual’s current empathic concern and his or her prior negative attitudes. In order to reduce

this dissonance, the individual has to change his attitudes toward the previously disliked out-group. Furthermore, being ethnoculturally empathic arouses feelings of injustice, which counteract prejudice (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). People who believe in a just world believe that others get what they deserve. They tend to blame the suffering of out-group members on negative stereotypes and traits of these groups. Members of the in-group will derogate the out-group because of these negative traits. But when a person becomes aware and learns about the suffering and discrimination while having empathetic feelings towards them, this leads to reappraising the assumptions concerning the victim blame. People then start to believe that the victims do not deserve this kind of treatment, which leads in turn to better feelings and more positive behaviors towards the out-group (Stephan & Finlay, 1999).

CONCLUSIONS

Since our society and organizations are getting more diverse, it is important to know how diversity influences cooperation in organizations, and what can be done to reduce intergroup biases and conflict. In the introduction of this research, the question we raised was whether ethnocultural empathy could have a mediating role in the relationship between intergroup contact and attitudes towards diversity. While the mediation is not fully supported, there is evidence that intergroup contact leads to higher ethnocultural empathy, and that some dimensions of ethnocultural empathy more than others lead to more positive attitudes towards diversity. Although the relationship between intergroup contact and attitudes towards diversity seems to be more complex than we portrayed it, we found evidence for the role of ethnocultural empathy in improving intergroup relations and helping people focus more on the positive sides of diversity.

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